

## **Chapter 6<sup>1</sup>**

### **Does Demographic Revolution Lead to Democratic Revolution?**

#### **The Case of North Africa and the Middle East<sup>2</sup>**

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In this chapter we will show how the demographic transition, in its broadest sense a universal phenomenon<sup>3</sup>, now encompasses the Arab (and Muslim) world. Beyond the stage of descriptive demography, we would like to pay attention to the elements of politics related to the demographic transition, particularly with regard to the Arab Spring, which started in late 2010. The connections we will draw between education, demography and politics are, in itself, not completely new. In fact, the British historian Lawrence Stone (1969) established already a link between education and revolution in an article published one year after the May Revolution of 1968.<sup>4</sup> His research suggests that once populations reach the threshold, in which 50% of their young males are literate, political trouble arises. The link between increased levels of education and social disruption can also be found in other regions, such as the Arab world today, where young people are, from a demographic point of view, the dominant group in the population and the driving force behind protests and revolution.

In this contribution, we will investigate how a youth bulge is present all over the North Africa and the Middle East, from Morocco to Iran. The presence of this youth bulges increases the risks for violence and revolution in this world region. However, disruption will not last forever. On the basis of demographic indicators, it is possible to predict a more serene future and a process of convergence with the Western world in terms of political development. This process will form the onset of an era in

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<sup>2</sup> Many of the idea's and materials presented in this chapter build on Courbage & Todd (2011).

<sup>3</sup> The demographic transition refers to the shift from a traditional population regime with high death and high birth rates to a population regime characterized by low death and low birth rates (Livi-Bacchi 2012).

<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Stone analysed the execution of King Charles the First in 1649, but he did not include demographic developments in his analysis.

which the youth bulge is declining, while the group of aged persons is still relatively small. The economic advantages of this new demographic stage will be immense for the Arab and Muslim world. Yet, the most promising outcomes might be that of a political nature, as we will show in this chapter.

## **6.1 From the Demographic to the Democratic Revolution**

Since December 2010, the speed, abruptness and scope of events in North Africa and the Middle East have taken everyone by surprise. However, the way that the events in the Arab World were perceived differs substantially from one world region to another. While the European and Arab media were initially very optimistic about the potential outcomes, the Israeli media, seem to have perceived the Arab Spring, at first, as a degenerative development with many potential negative outcomes. Ehud Barak, the Israeli Minister of Defense, went so far as to qualify ‘that tsunami of events’ as a kind of *intifadas* (Lister & Flower 2011).

Revolutionary events can be perceived as inevitable. The revolutionary processes that took place in early modern England and then burgeoned in France towards the end of the Ancien regime, before spreading throughout Europe and the world during the nineteenth and twentieth century, have also reached the Arab countries. For the past four decades, depending on their level of advancement, the Arab countries have been experiencing cultural, demographic and anthropological transformations, as well as changes in family systems, which resemble the changes that Europe has gone through since the English (1640-1660) and French Revolutions (1789-1793). Contrary to many essentialist or culturalist views, as expressed by Bernard Lewis (1990; 1993; 2001), Samuel Huntington (1993; 1996) and others, the Arab world is no exception.<sup>5</sup> Its development is not intrinsically different from

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<sup>5</sup> Both Lewis and Huntington argue that a clash between Western countries and the Arab world is inevitable, because Arab culture and Islam are perceived as fundamentally incompatible with Western values, democracy and modern development. The author demonstrates, however, that Arab and Muslim countries are experiencing the same developments as Western countries went through in the past, including increased education among males and females, declining mortality and fertility, a trend towards more egalitarian relationships between men and women, secularization, etc. Therefore, a convergence of civilizations is much more likely to occur than a clash of civilizations .

observed evolutions in other human societies. Conversely, the Arab countries are on the road towards modernity and stability, a road which is being paved by demographic and democratic revolutions.

### ***6.1.1 Education at the root of the transformations***

The multiple transitions that the Arab countries are going through nowadays were first and foremost triggered by access to education for boys, and later on, for girls. While the youth in the Arab world were almost completely illiterate a few decades ago, today most young people in North Africa and the Middle East are able to read and write by the ages of 20 to 24 (see graph 6.1). Several effects of this transformation are well-known and well-studied, such as the link between education and fertility decrease (Courbage 2009; Fargues 1988; Tabutin & Schoumaker 2005; Zuryak 1977). It is important to recall, that at the root of modernization processes and the demographic transition, gaining the ability to read, and especially to write, is an essential step for the individuation of the human being and the acquisition of autonomy (Cipolla 1969; Furet & Ouzouf 1977). Nevertheless, a holistic vision is still missing, linking the multiple stages of increased education to revolution.

**- Graph 6.1 about here -**

### ***6.1.2 Demographic metamorphosis and mental change***

Even though fertility has been the most significant and paramount factor that was affected by education, education also triggered mortality decrease. This demographic shift can be dated back to the seventeenth century when advances in medicine contributed also to decreasing mortality rates in Europe, which further advanced fertility decrease (Livi-Bacci 2012). In the developing world, the connection remains very clear, even still today. Infants and children of higher educated parents, and especially of higher educated mothers, have lower odds of passing away prematurely (Caldwell 1979; Caldwell & McDonald 1982; Cochrane 1986).

Similarly, but with some historical delay, Arab fertility would not have fallen if mortality had not taken the lead, pushing life expectancy from 40 years in the 1950's to over 75 years today. This

was to a large degree the result of a large reduction in infant and child mortality. Because more children survived, parents started to feel an incentive to limit the number of offspring. On the macro-level, mortality decline gave rise to strong population growth, which sooner or later was perceived as an obstacle to future (economic) development (Winckler 1998).

The mortality reduction was not only spectacular by its demographic effects, but also by its psychological implications. Arab populations are very often – hastily – characterized as fatalistic (even by themselves) (Moughrabi 1978; Patai 1973), and Arabic language is indeed filled with fatalistic expressions (Farghal 1993). Fatalism might have been rooted in the everyday character, death, embraced in past Arab societies. It simply was a banal phenomenon in every corner. The mortality decrease then became akin to a psychological revolution, reshaping the psyche of populations moving away from a fatalistic attitude and towards a more rationalized, agency-based mentality, in which people themselves (instead of god, fate and/ or predestination) realize that they influence the course of history.

In line with this trend towards more agency, people in North Africa and the Middle East started to control their own fertility like European populations had begun to do from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century on. Thus, fertility in North Africa and the Middle East fell from 7.5 children per woman on average in the period before the fertility transition, to less than 3 today, with several countries near or below replacement level (2.1). Hence, today Iran's fertility rate (1.8) is lower than that in Scandinavia; in Lebanon where 60% of the population is Muslim, the fertility rate (1.6) is lower than in Belgium (1.8); and Tunisia (2.05), Morocco (2.19) and Turkey (2.10) are only slightly above the TFR in France (see Graph 6.2).

**- Graph 6.2 about here -**

The progress in education - especially female education - has caused a delay in the age at first marriage and has increased the spread of contraception (Courbage 2009), to where there are basically no theological obstacles for Muslims and for large groups of Arab Christians (Bowen 1981; Esposito

2002). This spurred the decrease in fertility down to a low European average of 2 children, in the most advanced parts of the region like North Africa, Lebanon (not only among the Christians but also the Muslims, Sunnis and Shiites alike), Turkey and Iran (Courbage & Fargues 1997; Courbage 2009).

### ***6.1.3 Towards a more open and egalitarian society***

Another core aspect of societal change related to the demographic transition concerns marriage. Matrimony is no longer the sacred religious and social obligation that it used to be. In Morocco, for example, 42% of men and 33% of women aged between 30-34 years (some by personal choice) were still single in 2010. In Algeria, Tunisia, Libya and Lebanon the singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) for women approaches or exceeds thirty years now, almost double of what it was in the 1960's (Courbage & Todd 2011). But not only the timing and intensity of marriage have decreased, the very nature of marriage itself has changed as well. The occurrence of endogamy or the so called "Arab marriage", i.e. marital unions between family members, has been cut by half. Going beyond mere demographic calculations, we would like to underscore that when a society shifts from endogamic to exogamic marriages, like in Morocco for example, where marriage with relatives has fallen from 30% to 15% between 1995 and 2010, society becomes more open.

Furthermore, patriarchal social structures and mentalities no longer seem to resist demographic changes, which in turn weakens the very basis of traditional patriarchal system. In Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Iran, Turkey and in some areas of Syria (e.g. the Alawite, Druze, Ismaili populated provinces) the TFR is now close to, or below, two children. As a consequence, the probability of not having at least one son greatly increases as fertility continues to decline (see graph 6.3). Where the risk of not having at least one son was negligible or low when the TFR was above four children, it has become significant in those countries where the TFR has approached two. Thus 25% of the couples in the Maghreb, Lebanon, Turkey or Iran and in coastal and mountainous Syria today accept the possibility of having only two daughters without a male heir, apparently in contradiction with the teachings of Islam, or more profoundly, with the deeply rooted age-old patriarchal ideology (Courbage & Todd 2011).

**- Graph 6.3 about here -**

Finally, gender roles are subject to change due to the demographic transition. First, because women devote less of their time to reproductive tasks and have more opportunities to earn an independent living. Second, because ages at marriage have increased faster among females than among males, the age-gap between husbands and their wives has narrowed. Third, legal change in several Arab countries led to a situation in which women have more rights than was previously the case. All these trends have increased the bargaining power of women (Fargues 2005). Released from traditional role patterns, Arab women (Iranians also) have burst onto the scene during the Arab Spring, from Casablanca to Dera'a and even in remote Sana'a. *Purdah* or female seclusion seems to have come to an end. As a result of successful educational and demographic transitions, Arab societies are being reshuffled, and new roles for women are being created. This is especially proven by women's entry to secondary and higher education. In secondary education, net enrolment ratios are now higher for girls than for boys in a majority of the Arab countries, from Algeria (68/65) to Palestine (87/82), including the Arabian Peninsula and its emirates: Kuwait (92/88). Even more impressive is the enrolment of girls in universities, with the surprising result that in a majority of Arab countries, girls are now better educated than boys (see graph 6.4). These figures might soon influence employment, political, media and other spheres of Arab society.

**- Graph 6.4 about here -**

Going a step further, we claim that the aforementioned elements of societal openness might be conducive to revolt, especially when the population is governed by autocrats as is the case almost everywhere in the Arab region. Thus we would argue that a subtle combination of demographic changes, the inter-connectedness of mass education, mortality collapse, and an increasing choice in

marriage and fertility, might well act behind the scenes of rebellion against abject living conditions and absence of freedom.

#### ***6.1.4 Ambivalent effects of education and contraception***

There is a hidden face to education. Education, as well as contraception, are ambivalent factors with simultaneously positive and negative consequences. From the philosophers of the Enlightenment until Emile Durkheim, only the positive consequences of the acquisition of education for males and females were considered, e.g. that fertility decline is indispensable for economic progress. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, the dark side of modernization was also emphasized: Due to higher levels of education, there was an increase of suicide. By the same token, learning to read and write made individuals, and the masses, more mindful of their circumstances, and cultural progress might well sow the seeds of psychological destabilization. Concretely, we observe in Arab societies where literacy is rising that:

- Sons can read and write while their fathers, who still hold absolute power in patriarchal societies, cannot;
- Sisters are getting educated, as much as, or more than their brothers;
- Wives become as educated as (and sometimes more than) their husbands;
- The spread of birth control (a phenomenon that follows literacy) weakens or eliminates the traditional domination of men over women.

Thus, universal education might imply a direct destabilization of relations of authority in the family (Fargues 2005). These disruptions, in turn, might contribute to a psychological disorientation in society. Indirectly, contraception can have the same influence. The increasing use of contraception is a welcomed development, since limiting the number of children allows parents to invest more resources and attention in each child, who is then better fed and educated, receives better medical treatment and more affection. Parenting in a smaller family, particularly with regard to father-mother interactions,

becomes more democratic, freer, which can have an overall positive impact on society and governance. On the other side, a household in which an illiterate father wields authority over educated children with access to knowledge beyond the parents' reach – especially in a patriarchal society – may prove an explosive combination.

We may conclude that women's education is a destabilizing factor for society at first, as is the growing practice of birth control. The psychological tension of this change ("who will guarantee that the men will not be cheated on?") cannot be underestimated, especially in such societies where remnants of patriarchy have not completely disappeared. A vivid illustration of the link between sexual anxiety and political activism (in this case Islamist terrorism for a Kashmiri) may be found in Salman's Rushdie (2005) novel, *Shalimar the clown*.

#### ***6.1.5 Secularization: a pre-condition to the demographic transition?***

Besides the above described and well-known factors related to the demographic transition, we would now like to discuss the influence of secularization dynamics on fertility. A return to history shows that the secularization of individuals followed the emergence of education across the various strata of European society, although at varying tempos.

France, where fertility started to decrease by the second half of the eighteenth century, was the most precocious in this regard. By means of *coitus interruptus* and a sort of primitive condom made out of animals' intestines, French women went against the explicit teachings of the Church by actively curtailing their reproduction. *On trompe la nature jusque dans les campagnes*, lamented a Catholic priest of Ile-de-France (Ariès 1971). The rest of Europe underwent the same processes of secularization a century later, where the fertility transition was delayed, even though most of these countries had higher literacy rates than France.

Against all odds, Arab societies, which have undergone an exceptionally fast fertility transition, are also experiencing this same process of secularization. But how to measure it? Surveys on attitudes



about secularization are very rare, and still somewhat taboo in most Arab countries. Only in Morocco, officially one of the most conservative Arab countries in religious matters, where the King is at the same time “A Commander of the Faithful”, these types of surveys could be taken (El Ayadi, Rachik & Tozy 2006). Those surveys demonstrate that, contrary to stereotypes and preconceived ideas, religious practice is receding among the younger generations, as only 47% (36% among young males and 59% among young females) claim to be religiously minded.

The degree of religiosity has a clear impact on the act of voluntarily limiting the number of children. Contraception, either for European Christians or Arab Muslims, implies that they start to feel solely responsible for their reproduction and that “divine intervention” is no longer considered the genesis of procreation. Individuals understand their new meaning: to give life, without being dictated by the family, the tribe or by any political or religious power. Empirical data, even if limited, help to illustrate this major shift in attitudes. Whereas some forty years ago when the first surveys on the attitudes toward procreation in the Arab world were taken, an important number of women answered the question “what is your ideal number of children?” with non-numerical responses, like: “It is God’s will”, “I don’t believe in spacing births, it is God who decides...” etc., today such non-numerical responses have almost completely disappeared from the surveys.

When we discuss a process like secularization, it is important to note that it weighs heavily on the relations between different cultural regions. Contrary to many alarmists who decry a “clash of civilizations,” the Arab and Muslim worlds, in general, and more peculiarly, North Africa are now undergoing secularization. Secularization, however, should not be equated with either atheism or even agnosticism. Rather, it means that an individual can be totally secular in one’s daily behaviour, – notably for the ability to give life - while he or she at the same time goes to church, to the mosque, or to the synagogue. There is no radical contradiction. Arab societies are witnessing a phenomenon of “disenchantment of the world”, in the sense used by Max Weber, which occurred in the West two centuries ago.

Hence, contrary to the line of reasoning of the essentialists, the Arab world is currently experiencing a demographic transformation, that is also affected by increased secularization. It might look ironic, even provocative, to raise this issue of secularization at a time when the Islamist parties are accumulating electoral victories one after the other, from *Ennahda* in Tunisia to the *Parti Justice et Démocratie* (PJD) in Morocco in 2011, and the Muslim Brotherhood and the *Salafists* in Egypt in 2012 and their emergence elsewhere (Libya, Syria and Yemen). However, these victories of Islamists may be only of temporary nature, as Mohamed Morsi is, for example, already dethroned and the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt has been banned (again). The temporary resurgence of Islamist regimes can best be understood by taking into account the fact that most Arabs have only known the worst side of secular powers, autocrats and despots, with the Syrian and Iraqi Baath parties, or in a milder form Ben Ali in Tunisia, Qaddahfi in Libya or Mubarak in Egypt and Ali Abdallah Saleh in Yemen. Moreover, the French revolution and the 1848 revolution did not immediately lead to the instalment of stable democratic governments in Europe. After the French revolution, Napoleon Bonaparte reigned with an iron fist over France and larger parts of Europe. In 1848, his nephew became democratically elected, but he managed to quickly overthrow the democratic institutions before next elections were organized. As a result of his successful coup d'état, France turned once again into an empire.

## **6.2 A Democratic Revolution or Chaos**

### ***6.2.1 Democracy or Islamist chaos?***

There is no need to explain the violence in the Arab countries as a particular brand of Islam. It should be enough to recall the suddenness of the demographic transition within these countries compared to the one century it required in Europe, as exemplified in a fertility drop from 7.5 to less than three or two in a matter of four decades. This does not mean, however, that the Arab countries might not still be living in a state of disorientation, because of the sudden change of mentalities associated with rising literacy and the interconnected transitions related to male and female literacy and the use of contraception, and fertility decrease. Moreover many non-Muslim countries which are entering the key

stages of literacy and birth control today, also encounter massive political disruption, like Rwanda, Kenya, Côte d'Ivoire, Sri Lanka, Haiti... to name but just a few.

Researchers from the North, as well as from the South, and also most media, are mistaken when they present these crises as a regressive phenomenon, when they could also be defined as crises of the transition to modernization that disorient people and destabilize political regimes. It is therefore curious that, instead of looking at its positive and encouraging trends, researchers only seem to view the negative aspects of the changing Arab demography. In this regard, some recent analyses have focused on the demography of the Arab or Muslim world as a potential cause for increased radicalization and destabilization; like for instance, the strategic report "Towards a Grand Strategy for an Uncertain World," written by retired NATO generals and high ranking officers (Naumann, et al. 2005). Their assessment suggests that the Arab and Muslim countries constitute the world's most volatile area because of their "youth bulge", a demographic explosion that increases uncertainty and favours the easy spread of political fanaticism and radical Islam.

### ***6.2.2 The view from the youth bulge***

The "youth bulge" is a concept coined by political scientists, notably G. Fuller (1995), J. Goldstone (1991) and G. Heinsohn (2003; 2006; 2007). In a first phase of the demographic transition, the size and share of the more turbulent segments in the population, the youth, increases. This youth-bulge is usually measured as the increase of the 15 to 24 years old, in relation to the total population or to the "mature" segment of the population aged 25-64 years (Courbage 1997). The measure in itself only counts a mechanical effect in the whole sequence of the demographic transition: Mortality decline and fertility deceleration (or sometimes increasing and then declining fertility) contribute to the impressive reshaping of the age-structure of a population. According to the burgeoning literature on this subject, an excess of young adult males in a population leads to social unrest, war and terrorism, as "third and

fourth sons” (within the same family) find no prestigious positions in their existing societies. Therefore, these ‘lost sons’ rationalize their impetus to compete with religion and political ideology.

Looking as far back in time as the ancient Greek wars, a strong match can be found between the frequency of violent outbreaks (from war to terrorism) and the ratio of a young male population to its more mature segments in society. Heinsohn (2003; 2007) goes as far as to view most historical periods of social unrest and most genocides as the by-products of demographic youth bulges: European colonialism, fascism and more recently the on-going conflicts in Darfour, Afghanistan, Palestine/Israel, etc. Hence, “Age composition must be considered as a major coefficient in the incidence of violent behaviour”(Moller 1968: 255).

For Samuel Huntington, demography is a major determinant in the clash of civilizations<sup>6</sup>, especially between the Muslim and non-Muslim civilizations: “Population growth in Muslim countries and particularly the expansion of the 15-24 years, provides recruitment for fundamentalism, insurgency and migration. Economic growth strengthens Asian governments, demographic growth threatens Muslim governments and non-Muslim societies” (Huntington 1996:103). For Huntington there is a direct connection with the increasing level of education: “Islamist activists include a disproportionately large number of the best educated and most intelligent young people in their respective populations, including doctors, lawyers, engineers, scientists...”(Huntington 1996: 113).

Many explanations were given to explain the reason why young people, Arab or otherwise, are more inclined to gravitate toward violence than mature-aged persons. One of the reasons could be that the concept of death among the youth is presumably less developed due to an underlying physical basis, namely that the brain’s prefrontal lobe, which inhibits inappropriate behaviour, does not reach its full development before mature age (Casey, Tottenham, Liston & Durston 2005). Statistically, there are more homicides and crimes against property committed by the youngsters than by the older population

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<sup>6</sup> To be fair one has to acknowledge that the concept of a ‘clash of civilizations’ has been developed by Bernard Lewis (1990) before being immortalized by Samuel Huntington (1993;1996).

(Ferdinand 1970; Steffensmeier, Allen, Harer & Streifel 1989). Also family demography plays a role: in larger size families, where there are more youngsters, violence tends to be higher than in small families. Hence, it is easy to jump to the conclusion that terrorism and suicide operations are phenomena closely associated with youth, and therefore, with populations where the youngsters are still the predominant group. Finally, the *lumpen* youth class, the street idlers who have nothing to do because of the high unemployment rate, are tempted by riots, violence and radicalism. Celibacy and the huge delays in age at marriage, further create sexual frustration in conservative societies like Arab and Muslim societies – but not only there, as the example of Ireland in the nineteenth and the beginning of twentieth century shows – which might lead to violent acts.

The main problem with this school of thought is that it considers a rapidly moving reality as static and attributes this transient phenomenon to civilizational and religious factors. Arabs and Muslims are deemed reluctant to modernize and their demographic behaviour determined forever. The youth bulge, the end-result of an ephemeral high or increasing fertility, is considered as an unchanging and intrinsic feature of the Arab population. Moreover, the Arab psyche is believed to be reluctant to progress. Therefore, these authors are unable to acknowledge the profound diversity among Arab societies. Their sole explanation for their behaviour is the common religion. Yet, graphs 6.5 and 6.6 show that there were, and still remain, significant differences among Arab and non-Arab countries in the region, and that the youth bulge is a transient phase in the demographic transition. Hence, why shouldn't we forecast more peaceful societies, after the political disruption and the Islamist radicalization?

**- Graph 6.5 about here -**

**- Graph 6.6 about here -**

To investigate the youth bulge in more detail and to look at the potential of the democratic transition, we will look at six Arab countries of the Near East: Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Saudi Arabia and

Yemen and two from the Maghreb: Morocco and Algeria.<sup>7</sup>

In only four decades Lebanon, Morocco, Algeria and Turkey will have reached a convergence with the developed world in terms of population structure. In 2050, the demographic situation of these more advanced Arab/Muslim countries will be similar to that of Europe, North America and Australia with 12.8% aged 15-24 years and a ratio of the 15-24/ 25-64 of 23.4%. Iran will be even more advanced. Yet, these countries underwent severe youth bulges which belong to what we can call the “dark” side of the demographic transition. It is an error of the followers of Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, however, to consider a historical phase as ever-lasting and determined by the very essence of the Arabs or Muslims and their religious beliefs. The peak of the youth bulge belongs to the past in most of these countries:

- Morocco            2000
- Algeria            2004
- Syria               2001
- Lebanon           1976
- Palestine          2014
- Egypt              2005
- Saudi Arabia      1999
- Iran                2005
- Turkey             1997
- Yemen             2011

The demographic projections in graphs 6.5 and 6.6 - based on data from the United Nations - also demonstrate that after these difficult phases, the worst is over. The Arab and Muslim world are currently at the heart of the transition to modernity; as we are at the end of the youth bulge and in the

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<sup>7</sup> Jordan, Iraq and Tunisia are not represented in order not to overcharge the charts. Neither are the Emirates of the Persian Gulf: Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, UAE; here the charts would be meaningless due to the strong presence of foreign-born population.

middle of a universal process of modernization, a long cycle in which literacy, secularization and then declining fertility first highlight the differences between areas, and then lead to a general convergence. Some Arab and Muslim countries have already joined Europe by low fertility standards (e.g. Lebanon, Tunisia, Morocco, Iran); others are still on the road (like Yemen and Palestine), but their fertility is sharply declining. All will have converged with developed regions within a very short time span.

All this demonstrates that there are solid grounds for optimism, regarding the demographic, economic and political developments in North Africa and the Middle East. As the youth bulge, the favourite scarecrow of the enthusiasts of the clash of civilizations, has started to decrease, the demographic transition opens now new avenues. The decreasing pressure on the labour market, mainly due to the booming young population, is noteworthy. The reshaping of the age structure, a straightforward result of fertility decrease, will accommodate an expansion of the economic growth, and labour productivity will be the winner in this shift from quantity to quality. Furthermore, each member of the labour force will be in a position to transfer more in cash, or goods, to his or her old parents. This may limit the impact of ageing which will probably become an even more serious issue in the Arab countries than it is in Europe, because of the suddenness in the growth of the size and share of the cohort of the elderly.

The slowdown of “demographic investments” versus “economic investments” allows the state to turn its attention, as an economic actor, to the more directly production-related job-creating sectors. The private sector will also win from this demographic transition. The changing age-structure relates to an increase in the number of the adults compared to the young people, thus the ratio of producers to consumers. The falling fertility rate is generating an expansion of the age-groups with higher propensity to save, thus increasing the national saving-rate.

Less visible, but nonetheless very real, is the impact of fertility decline on narrowing the income distribution gap. Before the demographic transition started, not only did a smaller share of national income go to the poorer workers, but they also had to support larger families. Differential fertility in

Arab countries among rich and poor was a significant factor in living standards disparities. The reduction of rich/poor fertility gaps is a lever for economic take-off, as we know from the example of the Asian tigers (Bloom & Williamson 1998).<sup>8</sup>

Lower wealth disparities and a fairer distribution of knowledge strengthen the middle classes and favour pluralism. Therefore, it is not exaggerated to equate the demographic transition to the democratic transition.

### **6.3 The road to democratic transition**

The exact timing of the Arab revolutions was largely unforeseen. It is like forecasting an earthquake. Seismologists know for sure that a fatal event must happen, but they are completely unable to predict when it will occur. The same is true for social scientists or demographers who can forecast on the basis of their indices - literacy, urbanization, fertility, marriage, exogamy, youth bulge, unemployment, etc. - that something (a revolution? rebellion? upheavals?) has to occur in these countries, but they cannot predict when and how. Why has Tunisia paved the way with the first Arab revolution, followed by Egypt, where, by all means, the overall situation was much worse? Why later on Libya and Yemen? How might the situation in Syria (and Bahrain) evolve, in view of their peculiar demographic heterogeneity?

Forty-eight years ago, the Muslim world was viewed by social scientists as a very peculiar reality. Dudley Kirk (1966), the renowned American demographer, developed a special set of “laws” for Muslim demography: Fertility was universally high, showed no significant trend to decline and was believed to remain higher than for believers of other religions. The collapse of fertility in the Arab and Muslim regions is a vivid proof of the vacuity of lines of reasoning, as presented by Dudley Kirk. Only

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<sup>8</sup> For more details on the forecasted economic effects of Arab demographic transition, see Courbage (2003).



essentialists and culturalist thinkers could have thought that the Arab or Muslim world is by nature adverse to progress or modernity. However, as underscored in the introduction, comparative history enables one to understand that we are in the midst of a universal process, in which the demographic transition is a key component that leads societies from literacy to secularization, to contraception and ultimately to political revolution. Such processes started in Europe and did not stop at the gates of the Arab world. Here, its development in just four decades is a unique element, yet also an example of the acceleration of history.

Going one step further, we infer that if Arabs have adhered to the demographic transition in all its phases, including education<sup>9</sup>, contraception and secularization, they are also ready for the long way to political revolution and democratization. As we noted already earlier, in-depth transformations at the individual level cannot go without a reshuffling of long-established hierarchies, like the absolute paternal authority of the father over his children, who are more often better educated than their illiterate father. Becoming as educated and sometimes more than their husbands, women are less and less supportive of passive submission to the will of their spouses. The same can be said about the authority that the brother traditionally holds over his sisters. Hence, the demographic transition led to a cascading silent questioning of the once immutable family structure.

But demographic transition is not *un long fleuve tranquille*<sup>10</sup> (a bed of rose), dotted with many obstacles and multiple risks. One of the risks we alluded to, is derived from the ultimate resistance by the patriarchal and “machist” components of these societies. It requires more than a few decades to change the nature of the relations among sexes, from male domination to peaceful and quieter interactions. The threat hanging over male supremacy explains why the nostalgic *Salafist* way of

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<sup>9</sup> The acquisition of basic education has been an element of the Arab revolutions much more than the so-called “new technologies”, including internet, Facebook and Twitter, which were only instrument that spread the knowledge and the necessity of the political changes but were not at its roots. In any case, the internet is not conceivable without a certain ability to read and write.

<sup>10</sup> To paraphrase the title of a French movie directed by Etienne Chatiliez in 1988.

thinking, a return to the mythic perfect society of the beginnings of Islam, seduces some segments of the society, now so visible and audible in the landscape: the Islamic veil, the Islamic beard, the thundering minarets. All in all, beyond the veil, the beard and the minaret, one has to observe the ineluctable progresses of education and contraception.

For the largest parts of the (non-*Salafists*) population of North Africa and the Middle East, however, contraception and delayed age at marriage are now the norms. A small family size, the pattern to which the Arab societies are now more and more adhering to, brings about a decrease of pressure on family resources and makes the relations among spouses or between parents and children less tense and more egalitarian. The *pater familias* can no longer reign with an iron fist to impose discipline in an overcrowded household, cluttered with a dozen of children. All of which cannot but produce a beneficial input on the societal and political spheres. Even more what is occurring at the individual and family level inevitably will spill over at the societal level. Since after all, society is but the projection of the small family level to the large macro-level. The questioning of authority never stops at the micro level. The simple person who challenges the authority of his father, will soon contest the legitimacy of a President – especially a President for life –, as is the case in Arab countries.

Although this line of reasoning is not that prominent – usually because of the segmentation of social sciences: demographers study population matters, political scientists study politics, etc. - it is even less common to look how individual and family transformations affect politics,<sup>11</sup> even if it is the utmost futile to detach the changes at the individual and family level from those of the global sphere. Pursuing this issue, it is not exaggerated to claim that, although on a world or on the Arab scale there are exceptions, a correlation exists between the stage of demographic transition and the stage of democracy. In other words, in societies where family size is still of the ancient regime, the odds for autocrats or despots to rule are very high. Therefore, the transition of the demographic regime to a

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<sup>11</sup> An exception is Valge 2007

small family size appears a necessary – although not sufficient – condition to move out of authoritarianism on the route to democracy.

Without surprise there are unavoidable gaps between the pace of demographic and political transitions. Tunisia, in every respect the most advanced Arab country with regard to literacy, fertility and marriage, urbanization, gender-equality, etc., which had on top a religious and ethnic homogeneity, had to wait until January 2011 to experience the Jasmine revolution. On the basis of positive indicators like the TFR which was not far from 2 since ten years, we could have expected the overthrow of the authoritarian regime earlier. At the opposite, Yemen, with the worst demographic (a TFR still as high as 5) and socio-economic indicators, far apart from those of Tunisia, could get rid of its autocrat, which was in power for some three decades, just a few months after Tunisia. Between those two extremes we find Egypt, Libya and Syria, who are at the same stage of their demographic transitions, but are experiencing diverging political itineraries.

A paradox of history is that most often it is the political power which lies at the start of the modernization process, a process that will prove fatal to its survival. Arab rulers, whose sole objectives were and still are to stay in power, have unconsciously sowed the seeds which have prepared their fall. In Tunisia where Bourguiba, the first president for life, who would have kept the power for eternity before being kicked out by another autocrat, as well as almost everywhere else the process of modernization (access to education, to contraception and secularization), has worked in accelerating their fall and the emergence of democracy. Some autocrats were more careful, like the previous king of Morocco, Hassan II. After the upheavals in Casablanca in 1965, he was smart enough to foresee that universal education could be fatal to his regime and ordered a deceleration of educational progress, enabling him to retain his power until his death (Vermeren 2011). In other countries like Syria, autocrats sacrificed the quality of education, and with it its modernizing role. So, only with a few exceptions, limited to some periods of their history, no Arab country was able to block for good the social demand which has fuelled the demographic transition and which will prove to be the death

sentence of these regimes.

## **6.4 Conclusion**

To sum up, in all North African and Middle Eastern countries the access to a majority of boys being able to read and write, followed by a majority of girls being also able to read and write, has increased the level of consciousness of individuals (cf. their individuation), which led secularization going hand in hand with contraception, fertility decrease and diminishing family size. All are pre-conditions that favour democratic transition.

The common denominator for all these countries is the speed and suddenness of their demographic transition; even for the countries lagging behind in their demographic transition, such as Yemen where fertility is still very high (five children), the fertility rate nevertheless fell drastically. In 1990 the TFR of Yemen was double the value of today. Even in the rich and conservative countries of the Arabian Peninsula, the demographic transition has been particularly speedy. One can wonder if these countries (except Bahrain) will remain, thanks to their rental economies, protected forever from the currents of Arab upheavals.

People cannot take such a control of their demographic destiny and let others decide their political future!

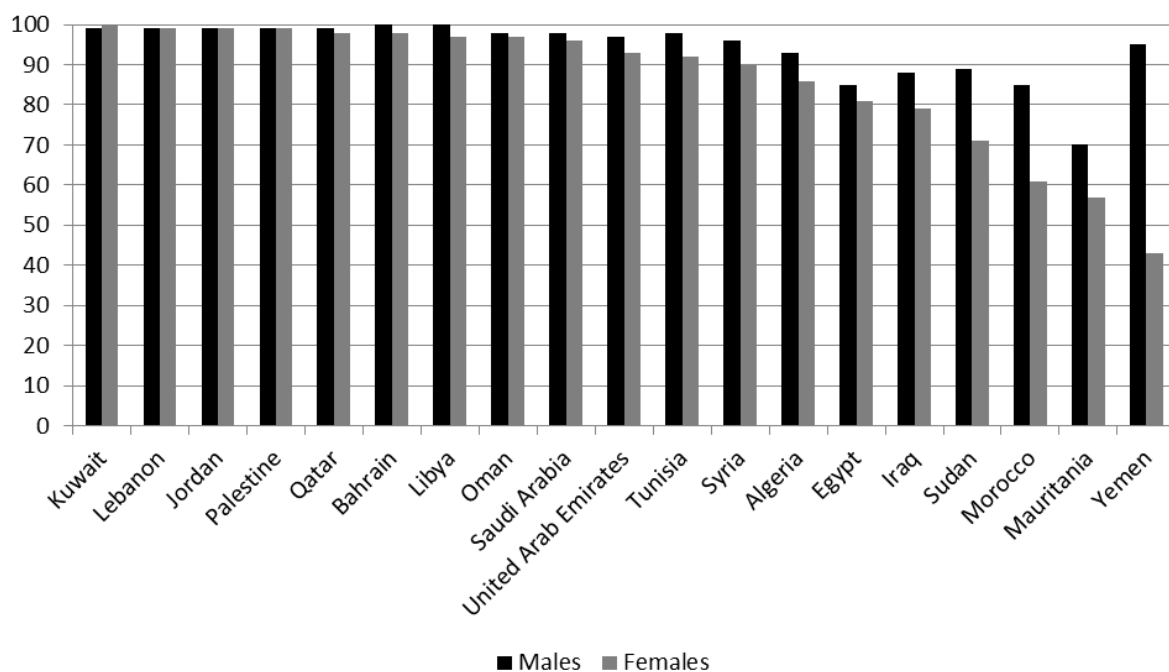
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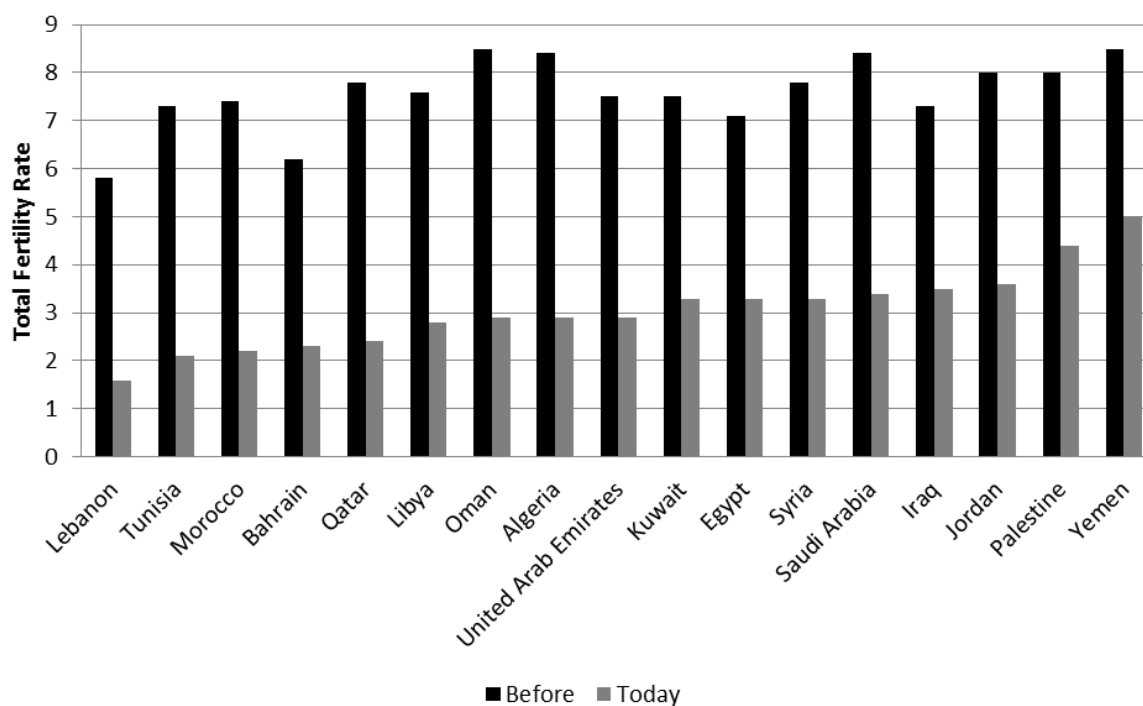
**Graph 6.1. Percentage of Arab youngsters (15-19 years) by sex who are able to read and write, 2010 1:**



**Source:** National population censuses and demographic surveys providing (il)literacy rates by age and sex

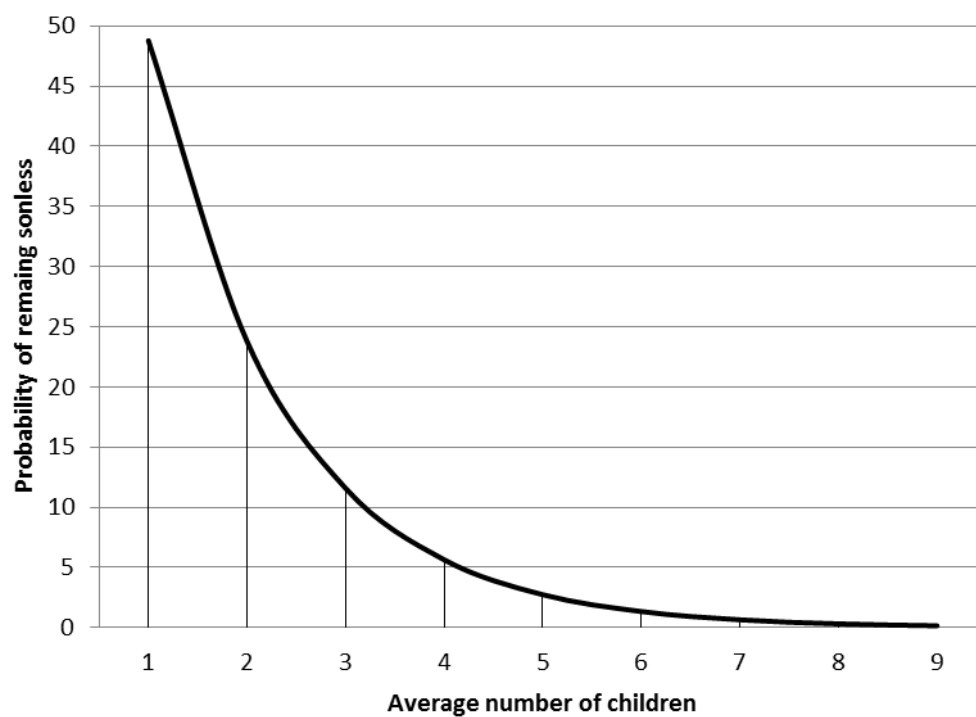


**Graph 6.2: TFR in the Arab Countries before the fertility transition (1960-1970) and in 2010**



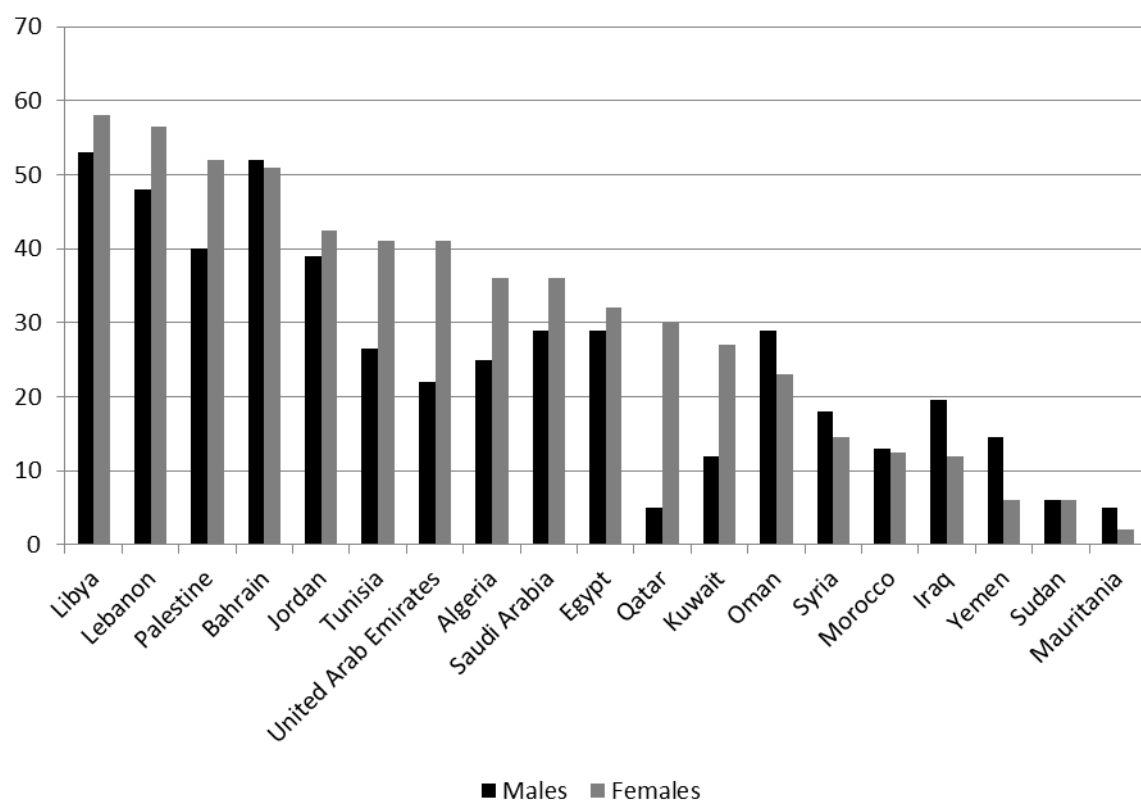
**Source:** Calculations based on national data from the World Fertility Survey, Demographic and Health Surveys, PAPCHILD, PAPFAM, Gulf Surveys, birth registrations and population censuses.

**Graph 6.3: Probability (%) to remain sonless by average number of children**



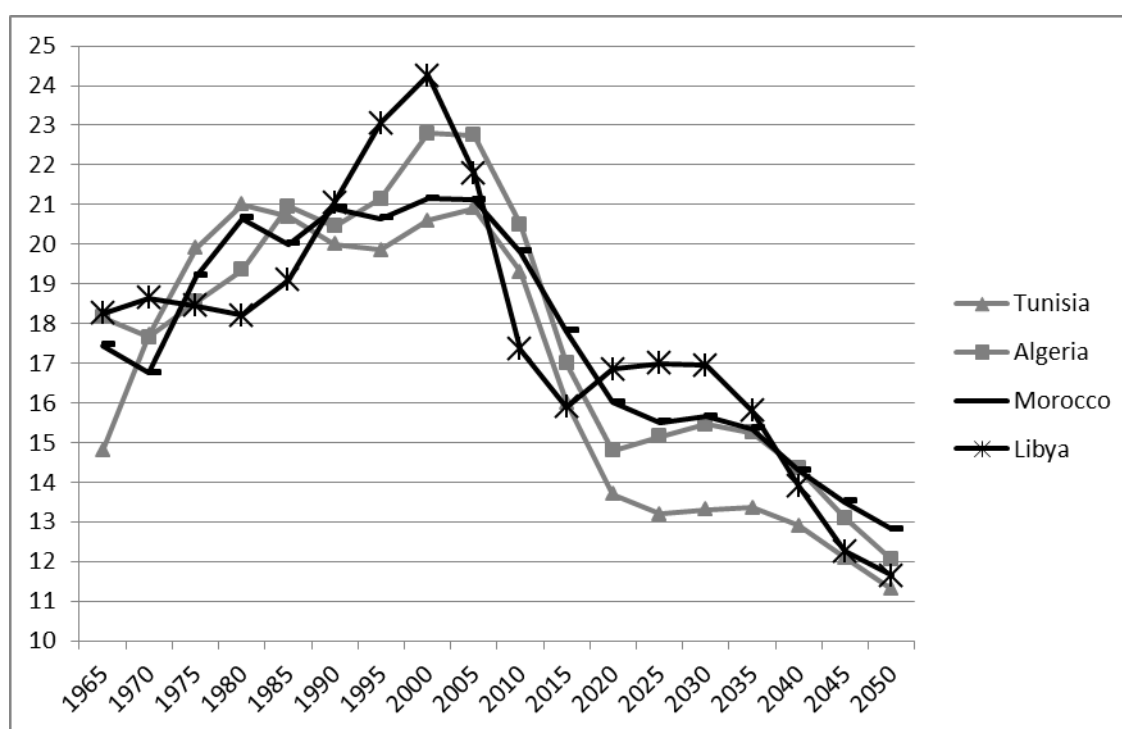
**Source:** Own probability calculations based on a sex-ratio at birth of 105 boys to 100 girls

**Graph 6.4: Enrollment ratio at university level (18-24) by sex and country, around 2010**



Source: Estimates from national statistical accounts

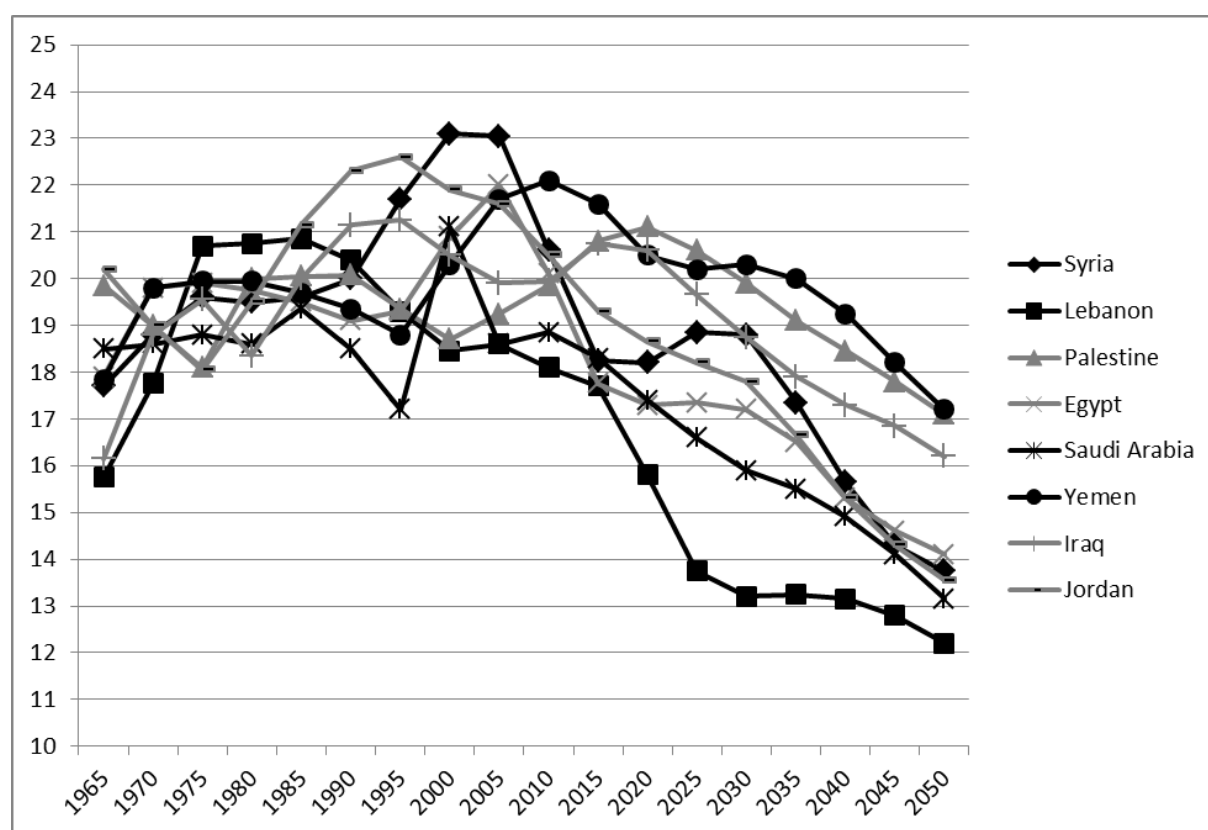
**Graph 6.5: The youth bulge and its future in the Maghreb, 1965-2050\***



\* 2010-2050: Medium variant

Source: United Nations World Population Prospects 2010

**Graph 6.6: The youth bulge and its future in the Middle East, 1965-2050\***



\* 2010-2050:Medium variant

**Source:** United Nations World Population Prospects 2010